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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 GUATEMALA 002744

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [ASEC](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER CIVIL PATROL MEMBERS TAKE JOURNALISTS
HOSTAGE

Classified By: PolCouns David Lindwall for reason 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: A group of approximately 500 ex-PACs blocked the inter-American highway in La Libertad, Huehuetenango on October 26 and took four journalists hostage, in an attempt to get the government to compensate them for wartime service. The former civil patrol members had originally taken the highway to block a campaign rally for FRG candidate Rios Montt, but took the journalists hostage when the FRG suspended the rally. The Minister of Government told the Ambassador that the GOG does not want to use force which could put the hostages' lives in jeopardy, and said that the GOG negotiators are offering to register the ex-PACs and process their compensation on an expedited basis. Opponents of the government in civil society and the media blame the GOG for the general lawlessness in the country and for creating expectations of compensation among the ex-PACs that the GOG is not able to meet. Former civil patrol members in other areas of the country who have not been compensated are doubtless watching the tense negotiation in Huehuetenango closely, and the resolution could lead to new protest actions. The daily images in the press of armed peasants blocking roads and forcing the FRG to cancel campaign rallies in areas where the ex-PACs have strength will not have a positive impact on the FRG's election campaign. End summary.

12. (U) On October 26, approximately 500 former civil patrol members (ex-PACs) blocked the inter-American highway at La Libertad in the Department of Huehuetenango to keep the FRG from bussing in participants to an election campaign rally for presidential candidate Rios Montt scheduled for later that day. The ex-PACs were protesting their lack of compensation by the GOG for their wartime service (Note: As of October 21, the GOG had compensated 454,098 former civil patrol members, including 60,313 in Huehuetenango. Tens of thousands of others who believe they have a right to compensation, however, have not received payments, leading to protests by ex-PACs in different areas of the country. End note). The ex-PACs detained four journalists from (anti-government) daily "Prensa Libre" at the road block, and continued to hold them as hostages after Rios Montt canceled his campaign rally. Vice President Reyes Lopez, in an address to the nation on October 27, claimed that four other hostages were also being held by the ex-PACs. The civil patrol members, who are poor peasants from that rural highland province much affected by the war, are using the hostages to pressure the GOG to compensate them.

13. (U) Prensa Libre editor Gonzalo Marroquin, Human Rights Ombudsman Sergio Morales and NGO rep Frank Larue traveled to La Libertad on October 27 to seek the release of the hostages. Huehuetenango Governor Carlos Morales (an FRG appointee) also traveled to La Libertad, but kept a prudent distance from the ex-PACs, as he had been held hostage by a different group of disgruntled former civil patrol members earlier this year. The ex-PACs claimed that they had filed for GOG compensation through the association of retired military personnel (AVEMILGUA), and rejected the GOG's contention that their names did not appear on any GOG lists (Note: AVEMILGUA is a private association of former military personnel. It is not a part of the GOG, but is viewed as having ties to or at a minimum sympathies with the ruling FRG. End note).

14. (C) The Ambassador has been in contact with Minister of Government Reyes Calderon since the hostage taking began, to urge the GOG to find a peaceful solution to the standoff. The Ambassador has also been in frequent contact with Marroquin, Larue and others in civil society and the GOG who are involved in seeking a solution. The Embassy issued a public statement on October 27 condemning the hostage taking. Reyes Calderon told the Ambassador that police had been sent to cordon off the site, and added that the GOG did not want to put the hostages' lives in jeopardy by escalating the confrontation or attempting a rescue. A high level negotiating team made up of GOG Peace Commissioner Soberanis, MINUGUA Chief Koenigs, GOG Human Rights rep (COPREDEH) Fuentes Soria, Huehuetenango Governor Morales, and representatives of the military and the Public Ministry are meeting with the ex-PAC leaders at the Military base in Huehuetenango on October 28. Minister of Government Reyes Calderon told the Ambassador that the GOG will offer to review expeditiously all the documentation the La Libertad ex-PACs can provide to substantiate their claims to compensation for wartime service, and will also expedite

payment to those who qualify. The GOG hopes the offer will result in a prompt release of the hostages, though they told us that many of the ex-PACs at the road block are drunk, undermining the possibility of reasonable discourse.

15. (C) Frank Larue and other civil society leaders denounced the government for abdicating its role of providing public security, telling reporters that the La Libertad hostage taking was only the most recent in a long series of violent crimes that illustrate that the Portillo government is not in charge (Note: a string of homicides only five days earlier -- including two shoot-outs on public buses which left seven dead -- have shocked Guatemalans, normally inured to crime reports. End note). Larue told the Ambassador that the ex-PACs in La Libertad had not been compensated because they were not FRG supporters, and that the GOG was only compensating ex-PACs that were likely to vote for them in the upcoming elections (Note: The fact that the La Libertad ex-PACs were associated with AVEMILGUA would seem to indicate that their electoral preferences, had they been compensated, would have been with the FRG. The OAS mission and the NGO CIEN, which have been monitoring payments to the ex-PACs, have not uncovered evidence that the GOG is discriminating by making payments only to ex-PAC members affiliated with the FRG as suggested by Larue. End note).

16. (C) Comment: The standoff in Huehuetenango may well be resolved in the coming hours, but the unfulfilled expectations created by the Portillo government by offering to compensate the former civil patrol members has frustrated tens of thousands of poor peasants who may draw inspiration from the action of the La Libertad ex-PACs. Former civil patrol members in Mazatenango and San Cristobal (Alta Verapaz) are at this time protesting peacefully (so far) against their lack of payment and have publicly threatened the FRG if it comes campaigning in those localities. With ex-PACs spread out all over the country, the possibility of protests emerging in other areas remains latent. The opposition to the FRG, including the press and the NGO's, are using the Huehuetenango hostage taking to illustrate for voters the danger of keeping the FRG in power for four more years. The message, carried by newspaper photos and radio news bulletins, that FRG candidate Rios Montt is not welcome in many rural communities where the ex-PAC feel deceived by the GOG can not be helping his campaign. It also will add to the concern of many Guatemalans that violent acts continue to be a part of elections in Guatemala.

HAMILTON